

Sermon on Thursday in Week of Pentecost 17*

Pr. Carl Voges, STS
Vicar, Society of the Holy Trinity
October 1, 2009

John 12.27-36

"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." [1 Corinthians 1.18]

In the Name of Christ, Amen.

Coming into this Retreat, we are anxious over a parishioner whose attitude is getting more and more destructive.

Or, we are thankful to spend a few days in the strengthening company of pastors who take their ordination vows seriously.

Coming into this Retreat, we are stunned to observe how a pastor can get so wrapped up in one's self and not be aware of the wrapping.

Or, we are frustrated over a parishioner who ignores the vital exposure to the Lord's Scriptures and Sacraments.

Coming into this Retreat, we are exhausted and angered and dispirited by the actions of Lutheran church structures which veer away from the Scriptures and the Confessions and the Lutheran Catholic Tradition.

Surfacing of these emotions and roiling they trigger in our lives prepare us to enter these verses from John 12 where our Lord is getting closer and closer to effecting rescue of world's people from the harsh realities of sin, Satan and death.

Recall that the Gospel of John opens with the Lord's Word, the Word that is Jesus Christ.

In the first chapter John points out that real Life is in that Word and that His Life is the Light of the world's people.

It is the Light shining in the darkness and the darkness, though it is an ominous threat to the Light, cannot overcome it.

John's Gospel then continues with the relating of seven of the many signs which Jesus worked in course of His ministry.

At first of those signs in Galilee at Cana, Jesus has an abrupt conversation with His mother which states that His hour has not yet come.

As the Gospel moves through the next six signs, we are drawn more and more closely to Jesus' Hour.

Today these verses from John 12 bring us right to the Hour's edge.

This entire chapter is highly familiar to the Lord's people:

- Giving us the context for Jesus' Farewell Conversation with His disciples on the night of Maundy Thursday.
- Giving us the context for the liturgies over which we preside in Holy Week.
- Giving us the context for the triggers which bring on Jesus' Crucifixion.

Jesus is in turmoil (use of the same word when He confronted the death of Lazarus), and He wonders if the Father should save Him from this Hour.

In such turmoil, though, He recognizes that it is for this purpose He is coming to the Hour.

He asks the Father to glorify His Name and the Father responds that He has and that He will!

The crowd is aware that something momentous has just occurred, but they don't know if it was thunder or speaking of angel.

Jesus comments that the voice emerged for their sake, not His.

He goes on to note that the judgment of this world is now, that the world's ruler will be cast out now, that He Himself, when He is lifted from the earth, will draw all people to Himself.

[John observes that Jesus says this to show by what death He is to die.]

In response, the crowd states that in their understanding from the Law the Christ (that is, the Messiah, the Anointed One) remains forever.

They wonder how Jesus can say that the Son of man (whom they do not know yet) must be lifted up.

Jesus replies that the Light is with them for a little longer.

He encourages them to walk in it while they have it so they are not overtaken by the darkness.

Jesus observes that those who walk in the darkness do not know where they go.

He also encourages them to believe in the Light while they have it so they may become sons and daughters of the Light.

Having said these words, Jesus departs and hides Himself from the crowd.

What this passage does is to tie the Lord's Word with the Lord's Cross, bringing us right to the edge of the Lord's rescue for this world's people.

When Martin Luther wrote of the Church's Marks in 1531, it is striking that their description opened with the Word and closed with the Cross.

The Word, which comes to the world from eternity, streams in on it only through the Holy Scriptures (there is no other authentic source for it).

As it makes its rough way into the world — breaking down the world's life and establishing the Lord's Life — its most visible / ultimate display is in the Cross.

As this Society is being led more deeply into its second decade, it is striking to observe the awareness and learning which has been taking place in its Retreats and in the exercise of the Church's ministry.

Steadily and solidly, the Lord God has been pulling us from our selves to Him.

From first General Retreat in 1997 to now, we have always concentrated on the Scriptures and the Sacraments, on Tradition and the Confessions.

Thankfully, that concentration has gotten sharper and sharper even as things have gotten more and more chaotic in the church structures to which we belong.

It was just a little over two and a half years ago that the Society's officers and deans were led to adopt a three year study program on the Church's Marks, description written by Martin Luther in the early 1530s.

In the discussions at that Leadership Retreat in January, 2007, it appeared to be a logical fit.

It was noted that the chaos surrounding Luther's life and ministry mirrors the chaos surrounding our life and ministry today.

It was also noted that Luther's renewed emphasis on the Scriptures and Sacraments mirrors the emphasis of this Society.

At this year's Retreat, the three year study on Church's Marks is officially coming to an end, but the focus on those Marks over these years has one person concluding that we are just beginning to get into them!

In fact, these Marks are so comprehensive and so distinctive they could totally define our exercise of the Church's ministry!

These Marks are so comprehensive and so distinctive, they could end up being the authentic authority (exousia) for all church structures, Lutheran and beyond!

How can we come to such conclusions?

Remember that Martin Luther's description of the Marks begins with the Lord's Word and concludes with the Lord's Cross.

With the Word and the Cross driving through all the Marks, all seven of them become a living template, one pulsing with the Life of the Holy Trinity.

This template, imbedded in the Scriptures and echoed in the Confessions, can be applied to any situation, to any person, to any circumstance, to any church structure!

In his description, Martin Luther also noted that where the Lord's Word is surfacing, there is the one, holy, catholic / apostolic Church!

For pastors who take their ordination vows seriously and subscribe to The Society's Rule, the template becomes a stunningly clear framework for the ministry they exercise.

For parish communities who take seriously their ministry of reflecting the Lord's Life and carrying it into the thlipsis of this world, the template also becomes a stunningly clear framework for such reflecting and carrying.

The template of the Church's Marks reminds us that a parish community is where the faithfulness of the Lord's people is lived and expressed.

The template of the Church's Marks also reminds us of our instinctive nature, of the life given us by world at birth.

Because of that birthed life, if the Word and the Cross are not driving through this template, then it merely becomes a vehicle for our selves, for our parishes, for this Society.

Whether one looks casually or intently at Lutheran church structures in these days, it is easy to see why the chaos is increasing rather than decreasing.

There is an unrelenting focus on self — individually and corporately — there is a reversion to the basic impulse given us at birth!

The only reality which can disrupt that focus and rescue those trapped by it is the Word and the Cross, the Word and the Cross pulsing through the Church's Marks!

That's why, in the years to come, our immersion in the Marks will continue to intensify.

Every Sunday the Lord's Word surfaces in the Scriptures and pushes through the Liturgy of our parish communities.

With all roiling chaos in our church structures, it is essential for us pastors to research the Scriptures well so the Word can be fully and plainly proclaimed.

While the Word breaks down the world's life which is still imbedded in us, it also re-sets us in the Life given at Baptism.

Sunday after Sunday we are hurled from Good Friday through Holy Saturday to Easter Day, Sunday after Sunday we are grounded in the Word and in the Cross!

And in between those Sundays?

That's where it is our privilege and our responsibility to exercise the Church's ministry among the five other Marks.

It strengthens a parish community when its members and friends have the opportunity to worship in Evening Prayer, Morning Prayer or Compline.

Here are three brief examples of that strength emerging:

- Recall the first Lesson from Isaiah 8 for Saint Matthew's Day (a week ago this past Monday), did you notice how those words were a perfect fit for today's ministry!
- Recall the Psalms appointed for use in the mornings and evenings of each day every month, have you noticed how they fit every circumstance you encounter that day!
- Recall the occasional use of Compline when your Parish Council is dealing with some stubborn problems, have you noticed how that order for Prayer provides a much better context for the thinking and deciding that night!

It strengthens a parish community when its pastor makes it clear that the ministry is not about that person or that parish or that church structure, but that the ministry is about the Lord God who has rescued us from the harsh realities of sin, Satan and death. >

It strengthens parish community when people are reminded of their Baptisms, when the Lord's Supper is a frequent occurrence, when people can confront the Lord's Forgiveness privately.

The template of the Church's Marks undergirding a parish community's life assures its members and friends that the Lord's activity is keeping them in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church!

However, what of the exhaustedness, the anger, the dispiritedness which may be surrounding us at this Retreat?

Can this template of the Church's Marks address such emotions?

Yes, it definitely can!

It is the veering away in our church structures which is driving those emotions upon and within us.

It is the veering away in our church structures which is dangling other possibilities in front of us:

- Should we look to another Lutheran structure?
- Should we consider an Orthodox or Roman structure?
- Should we create an independent structure?
- Should we intensify the shadow character of the Society?

Cunningly imbedded in those possibilities, though, is the destructive reality of focusing on one's self.

The blunt assessment is that we do not have the skill sets, the personalities or the smarts (as impressive as they may be in this Society) to counter or to clarify this veering away.

But we do have an increasing awareness of what the Lord God has been doing with us for the past twelve years — pulling us from our selves to Him!

It is the Lord's pull which has brought us to the Marks of the Church, Marks which open with the Word and close with the Cross.

As the Lord continues to imbed us in those Marks, He will guide us well through all the possibilities confronting us.

Leaving this Retreat, then, we are thankful for the Lord exposing us to the Marks of His Church!

Leaving this Retreat, then, we are thankful He has crossed our lives with one another!

Leaving this Retreat, then, we are thankful He will continue to immerse us in the Word, Baptism, Supper, Forgiveness, Prayer, Ministry, and the Cross!

Leaving this Retreat, then, we are thankful He gives us the nerve and the clarity to see through the roiling chaos in our church structures!

Leaving this Retreat, then, we are thankful the Lord has renewed us to exercise His ministry in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church!

Now may the peace of the Lord God, which is beyond all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through Christ + Jesus our Lord.

* [Background for this Sermon was written in the [latest newsletter](#) of the STS, Volume 12, Number 3, After Pentecost 2009]

Society of the Holy Trinity

contact: webmaster@societyholytrinity.org

Copyright © 2009 Society of the Holy Trinity. All rights reserved.

Posted — 5 November 2009

Home Page: www.societyholytrinity.org